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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ISTANBUL 000615

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SUBJECT: REGIONAL ACTIVISTS STRATEGIZE ON BOLSTERING THE
IRANIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

REF: A) ISTANBUL 601 B) BAKU 1156

Classified By: Acting Pol/Ection Section Chief Geoff Odlum; Reason 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Iranian, Azeri, and Turkish human rights experts participated in a "regional women's rights discussion" November 28-29 in Istanbul, co-hosted by Turkish and Azeri human rights NGOs. Focusing primarily on the beleaguered state of women's rights in Iran, the speakers highlighted the need for the Iranian women's rights movement to organize itself more effectively; develop closer contacts with other elements of Iranian civil society (e.g., student groups, labor unions); develop a network with Azeri and Turkish counterparts; and work within the Iranian system to challenge and change laws, set legal precedents, and raise public awareness about the importance of respecting and enforcing women's rights. The enthusiasm of most participants over what one described as "a movement coalescing" was tempered by a co-host's description of this conference as only a "first step," underscoring the need for effective follow-up (which the Azeri NGO pledged to undertake). We will stay in contact with Turkish participants, and encourage like-minded Turkish NGOs to support efforts by Iranian women's rights activists to build closer NGO-to-NGO networking links. End summary.

A lively Iranian women's rights conference in Istanbul

¶2. (C) ConGen Istanbul's NEA "Iran Watcher" attended the November 29 session of a November 28-29 conference in Istanbul examining women's rights in Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, co-hosted by Novella Jafaroglu, Director of the Baku-based "Association for Protection of Women's Rights" (ref B), and by Abdulla Buksur, Director of the "Turkish World Research Foundation" in Ankara. (Comment: Istanbul's Isik University had originally agreed to co-host with the Azeri NGO but withdrew its participation in October because of timing and resource constraints.) The conference was attended by more than 50 activists from Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, though no reports of the event appeared in the mainstream Turkish press. Despite the conference title, the discussions focused primarily on the poor state of women's rights in Iran. Jafaroglu told us that her NGO is preparing a summary of the remarks of all participating speakers, including from the November 28 session that we were unable to attend (speakers that day included well-known German-based Iranian human rights activist Hassan Shariat-Madari). ConGen Istanbul and/or Embassy Baku will forward the conference summary report to NEA and others upon receipt.

¶3. (C) The conference's November 29 session included presentations by Iranian human rights activist and journalist Ali Hamid Iman, who is also actively involved in the Iranian-Azeri ethnic rights movement in northwest Iran (ref A), by Iranian journalist Jilla Golanzar, and by the Azeri

NGO host, Novella Jafaroglu. Discussion was lively and free-flowing, even during formal presentations, with speakers appearing to tolerate frequent (polite) interruptions and verbal give-and-take from the floor.

Iman: Networking, domestic outreach, and setting legal precedents

¶4. (C) Must move on from Marxist origins: Iman gave a brief recent history of the Iranian women's rights movement, noting that before the 1979 revolution the movement was led by a predominantly Marxist leadership, and even today still carries the "residue" of that leftist past. As a result it remains easy for the GOI to brand the current women's rights movement as Marxist and anti-Islamic, even though current leaders like Shirin Ebadi and Simin Behbahani are moderates, Muslims, and clearly not Marxists. Almost by definition in an Islamic society, Iman cautioned, women's rights groups are seen as secular and anti-Islamic, a perception that puts such groups immediately on the defensive. He urged that women's rights groups be attentive to public attitudes towards their activities, act as much as possible in an apolitical way, work within the system, underscore their commitment to Islamic values, and emphasize that the goal is promoting basic human rights, not regime change. Iman's explanation prompted a hejab-donned Iranian observer (who would not give her name but identified herself as a dedicated Islamist) to assert that the Iranian regime "has so corrupted Islam with velyat-e-faqih (comment: rule of Islamic jurisprudence) that it has taken all women's rights and dignity away from us, in defiance of what the Koran commands. Genuine Islam would

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protect us more and give us higher status than what we have ever had under this government."

¶5. (C) A no-win argument: In response, Turkish NGO director Abdullah Buksur took the floor to argue, in the day's only discordant debate, that Sunni Islam (as practiced in Turkey) offers women far greater legal equality than Iranian Shiism. Buksur claimed that Shiism confers on women only 50 percent of the legal rights that men enjoy, a status enshrined in Iran's constitution and Sharia-based penal code. Buksur called that "an unacceptable inequality" which Iran's neighbors and the international community must do more to protest. To stem an increasingly divisive argument over Sunnism vs. Shiism in a women's rights context, Jafaroglu took the floor to underscore to participants that the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, rather than any single nation's religion or constitution, should provide the legal basis for identifying the rights that all Iranians may enjoy.

¶6. (C) An evolving organizational structure: Iman noted that many successful civil rights movements in the West evolved into a "pyramid" structure, starting with a solid foundation based on broad civil society support for the movement's goals, and working towards successful, step-by-step changes in both the laws and the social mores of the societies in which they operated. In contrast, he characterized the Iranian women's rights movement as "leaves in the wind" -- lacking a solid foundation, and neglecting to focus on achieving incremental, concrete progress in passing laws or changing social values. In Iran there are many voices advocating women's rights, but no record of lasting success at impacting GOI decision-making, or securing official positions of responsibility for women serving in the Majles or GOI. Unlike women's rights movements in the West and some in Asia, the women's movement in Iran remains too disorganized to start effecting lasting reform. He urged Iranian women's rights advocates to organize themselves more cohesively. Creating "many more, and more active, NGOs" is part of the solution. "We need to build civil society pressure on the regime; we need to start to change public perceptions." He suggested that positive change is never

going to come from the government, but rather "must come from outside forces" (comment: emphasizing that he meant outside forces inside Iran). Iman urged the participants to "use globalization as a tool to help us", explaining that as a result of the global information revolution, the goals that Iranian women's rights advocates want to achieve are already "accepted and understood and practiced almost everywhere else the world."

¶17. (C) Global networking as one key: Iman called on the Iranian women's rights movement to place higher priority on connecting to other women's rights groups in other countries, so as to benefit from their experiences. He cited the "One Million Signatures" march in Iran in 2006, which he called a rare case of the Iranian women's rights movement mobilizing the population and getting global attention, as an example successfully borrowed from another national women's rights movement, in that case having been suggested by a Moroccan women's rights group. Iman called on the international community -- not just the UN and its member states, but also the international business community, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions, to pressure the regime to respect women's rights or risk losing international business and development assistance.

¶18. (C) Domestic outreach as another: The Iranian women's rights movement must also widen its base of support within Iran, Iman added. The movement's leaders must do more to build cooperative relationships inside Iran with other human and ethnic rights groups, and not allow the regime to "create wedges between students, women, labor leaders, intellectuals, and Iranian ethnic groups." All of these groups, he noted, are pushing for the same basic human rights; it is in their mutual interest to band together to protect and reinforce each other.

¶19. (C) Working within the system: Iman cautioned that the regime may increase its repression of such civil society groups as regime leaders feel increasingly vulnerable to economic and diplomatic isolation. "We will face more oppression. We need to be able to fight back within the legal system, and defend our actions in court." He recommended seeking out specific legal cases where the women's rights movement could win concrete legal victories and set legal precedents, which he suggested would help enshrine step-by-step legal reform.

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Golanbar: Use the courts to challenge honor killings

¶10. (C) Jilla Golanbar, a freelance Iranian journalist, supported Iman's proposal to seek out "winnable" legal cases, urging Iranian women's rights advocates to focus on challenging "honor killings" in Iranian courts. She described honor killings -- typically, extrajudicial punishment, including murder, by fathers or brothers against a woman thought to have engaged in relations with a man outside of marriage -- as pervasive among less-educated, rural, and traditional Iranian families. Golanbar said that honor killings are rarely prosecuted or even investigated in Iran, as courts consider it an internal family matter.

¶11. (C) Golanbar highlighted examples of recent honor killings in Iran, including cases in which a teenage girl was killed by her father for talking romantically on the telephone with a boy; another teenage girl was strangled by her father for acting "suspiciously" and complaining of abdominal cramps (which the father wrongly assumed was pregnancy); and a case where an 11 year-old girl was raped by her uncle, then beaten severely by her father for "seducing" the uncle. In these cases, the fathers were not prosecuted. Golanbar called on women's rights advocates to build a legal challenge against such honor killings and raise more international awareness about the problem. She acknowledged

that because the practice is based on long-standing tradition, communities and courts that tolerate honor killings will be slow to change, especially in rural areas and among less educated Iranians, "but for humanitarian reasons we must do more, and for practical reasons this would be an area to raise legal challenges." Golanbar endorsed Iman's recommendation on networking with outside NGOs, calling for the establishment of a regional network -- starting with Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan -- of women's rights NGOs that would include legal assistance to challenge such laws in court.

¶12. (C) Turning to the need for sustained focus on legislative issues, Golanbar recounted the campaign launched by Iranian women's rights advocates in August and September to protest against the Majles's consideration of a "Family Protection Bill" that would have legalized polygamy and set penalties against women who marry foreigners without GOI permission, among other archaic measures. The pressure that leaders like Shirin Ebadi were able to bring to bear on the Majles forced the bill to be sent back to the Majles's Judicial Committee for review. But Golanbar cautioned that the bill would likely be returned to the Majles floor for reconsideration in coming months, with "conservatives and traditionalists better prepared next time to ignore our concerns and pass the bill, so we need to be prepared as well."

¶13. (C) Women and divorce: Golanbar bemoaned that in the Iranian legal system, "almost all the legal rights in divorce cases rest with men, including custody rights, and right to even petition the court for a divorce." Women only have the right to seek divorce if the husband is a drug addict or impotent, she claimed, while men may seek a divorce for almost any reason, and the testimony of male witnesses to support the husband's claim are accepted without question as evidence. Golanbar also noted the intense social pressure on wives to keep a family together, even in the face of spousal abuse. Extended family, neighbors, and co-workers will often pressure an abused wife to stay in a marriage. Golanbar urged women's rights groups in Iran to offer legal and logistical support to wives who are trying to seek divorces from abusive husbands.

Jafaroglu: Keep up the momentum

¶14. (C) Novella Jafaroglu closed the November 29 session by pointing out that women make up the majority of the Iranian population, and over 60% of current university-level students. "Women represent the future of Iran, whether or not the government wants to admit it." She counseled patience and moderation, however, as the Iranian women's movement evolves into a more cohesive and organized factor within Iranian civil society. "Improving women's rights in Iran will not happen overnight. It will be a long and slow step-by-step process." She reaffirmed the remarks from the other speakers on the need to work within the system to effect change, specifically endorsing the calls to work within the current legal and legislative systems, and with the Iranian media, to methodically change laws, regulations, legal precedents, and public opinion.

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¶15. (C) Jafaroglu also reinforced Iman's and Golanbar's appeals to women's rights advocates to seek cooperation with regional NGOs and create a regional women's rights network. Jafaroglu warned that reaching out too explicitly to western (US and EU) human rights NGOs would raise red flags within the regime, while women's rights groups in most Arab states were no more advanced in their organization or practices than Iranian counterparts, so Iranian women's rights groups should first focus on creating a regional network with Turkish and Azeri counterparts. At the same time, the Iranian women's movement should quietly solicit statements of support from the UN and international human rights NGOs like Amnesty

International, to make clear to the regime that "the world is watching." Jafaroglu pledged to organize a follow-up conference soon in Azerbaijan, to move the discussion towards more concrete, organizational planning.

Comment: Early stages of coalescing movement?

¶16. (C) This appeared to be a well-run conference attended by a broad range of pragmatic participants, most of whom seemed to agree with the main themes that emerged from the discussions (which Jafaroglu suggested to us could serve as a "road map" to guide their next steps): that the Iranian women's rights movement needs to organize itself more effectively while maintaining an apolitical focus on promoting fundamental human rights; that it should develop closer links to other aspects of Iranian civil society; that it should build networks with Azeri and Turkish counterparts; and that it should work within the Iranian system to challenge and change laws, set legal precedents, and raise public awareness about the importance of respecting and enforcing women's rights.

¶17. (C) The enthusiasm on the part of most participants over what one described as "a movement that is finally coalescing" was tempered, prudently, by Jafaroglu's characterization of this conference as a "first step." Her recognition that progress will likely only come incrementally underscores the need for effective follow-up not only in Iran but also in Turkey and Azerbaijan, especially in the event Iranian authorities target Iranian participants in the conference or raise further pressure on the Iranian women's rights advocates to undercut their organizational efforts. As Jafaroglu's Baku-based NGO proceeds with planning for a follow-up meeting or event, Mission Turkey will stay in contact with Turkish participants, and encourage like-minded Turkish NGOs to support efforts by Iranian women's rights activists to build closer NGO-to-NGO networking links.

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